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## Decentralization in India with special reference to Panchayati Raj Institutions: Rhetoric and Reality

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**Abstract-** All human civilizations try to ensure and strive to achieve development. The approach greatly varies from state to state. One of the important strategies that have attracted the attention of the world leaders irrespective of their ideologies is decentralization. Countries from Latin America to South Asia, from Scandinavian countries to less developed African countries are using in their own way to decentralize in the context of administrative, political and economic perspectives. Some are over enthusiastic to declare that it is the panacea for all ills that we face in the present world. India has always followed the concept of decentralization in different field to address the age-old problems which exist in the field of governance. This paper studies whether decentralization has brought necessary changes in the public life of India or it remains a token endeavor to appease the common people. The study also explores how political decentralization has been introduced and what could be the possible bottlenecks for the full fledged implementation of the decentralization. The study also highlights the ethical issues and the existing value system to understand whether it is the time to have a re looks on the whole process of decentralization. The paper seeks to highlight the involvement of the common people in the process of planning. It also address the pertinent issue if the decentralization which aims to empower people in their public life, really gave voice to the Indian people and accommodated in the main stream.

**Key Words-** Decentralization, Administration, PRIs, Power, NGOs

### Introduction-

India is considered a leading state among SAARC countries with respect to decentralization. The system of decentralization has been established through constitutional provision, necessary legislation and time to time amendments to the existing legislations. The Indian politicians often resort to the rhetoric that democratic decentralization has ushered a new era of representation of marginalized groups, bringing good governance and inclusion of the common people in the planning process. They often argue especially before every general election that the power is with the people and because of the decentralization, a silent revolution has taken place as huge number of people's representatives have been included in rural panchayat bodies and Urban Municipal Bodies .

The concept of decentralization is widely accepted in the field of development and is often projected as the panacea of all ills that exist in the administration. It tries to give primacy of the people at the centre of any development initiatives. The concept has been deliberately brought to the forefront because of the importance of masses in the democratic set up. As we are aware of the general tendencies of the human beings regarding capture of power and its use for fulfilling selfish needs, the necessity to install a system which prevents the concentration of power in the hands of

few was felt long ago in the human civilization. This wish had been reverberated in the voice of Theseus, the king of Athens as follows-

*This state is not*

*Subject to one man's will, but is a free city*

*The King here is the people, who by yearly office*

*Govern in turn. We give no special power to wealth;*

*The poor man's voice commands equal authority.*

Even today the ideals mentioned above seems to remain a utopia in the common parlance of the Indian people. That is why it is widely believed that different types of decentralization for example political, administrative, fiscal and market decentralization would bring the desired changes in the lives of common people. In simple terms the decentralization is the flow of administrative authority, role and responsibilities through a process from upper level of Government to intermediate and Local level of Government and even to the Non- Governmental Organization (NGOs). In this context, political decentralization plays a vital role as actions taken by a democratic state largely depends on the political will of the leadership. Political decentralization tries to accommodate the voice of the people and their elected representatives in the decision making. This has also supported more active participation of people in the formulation and implementation of policies (Jennie and Richard, 1998).

**Objectives-**

The current paper seeks to examine the following-

- To examine whether decentralization has brought necessary changes in the public life of India
- To explore how political decentralization has been introduced with special reference to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)
- To identify the possible bottlenecks for the full fledged implementation of the decentralization

**Research Methodology-**

The authors of this paper completely depend on the secondary sources. The secondary data were collected from various publications, books, study report, magazine, newspapers and internet website.

**Decentralization as it evolved in the Indian Context-**

Decentralization is the buzzword in the contemporary development sector India. India took considerable time before to shed the image of a police state to a welfare state. The framers of Indian Constitution realized the need of installing of a government which will truly be termed as “of the people, by the people and for the people”. Unfortunately the country’s administration remained apathetic to the needs of the common people for long and bureaucratic structure is largely blamed for this undesirable consequence. The Government depended basically on the bureaucrats to bring the necessary changes at the grass root. Unnecessary expansion of bureaucracy has only resulted and bears the evidence of negative contribution in every field. Even today the set up has firm grip over the administration and largely blamed for the red tape in the way of development in a democratic manner.

The need of decentralization was felt even by the Britishers as they realized the importance of the local self – governments which were part and parcel of Indian life. They destroyed and had introduced centralization to have firm grip over the ruled and later on realized that it was next to impossible to ensure governance without the sharing of power at the local level. Recorded History shows that it was Lord Ripon who took initiative in establishing Local Self Government and subsequently Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909) was commissioned to look into the matter. Finally the Morley-Minto reforms led to the enlargement of elective elements in the local self- government in India (Pal, 2004)

After the independence the PRIs found its mention in the first five- year plan but Community Development program was launched which failed to ensure people’s participation. Then Balvantray Mehta Committee was constituted and its

recommendation envisaged the a three-tier system for decentralization. We all know that Rajasthan was the first State to inaugurate Panchayati Raj followed by the then Andhra Pradesh. But unfortunately PRIs could not do much till the late seventies and early eighties. Yet evaluations on the functioning bears the evidence of public participation in their own affairs (Pal, 2004).. It is also pertinent to mention the observation made by the Ashok Mehta Committee- “ Politically speaking, it became a process of democratic seed-drilling in the Indian soil, making an average citizen more conscious of his rights than before, Administratively speaking, it bridged the gulf between bureaucratic elite and the people,. Socio-culturally speaking, it generated a new leadership which was not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro- social change in outlook. Finally, looked at from the developmental angle, it helped rural people cultivate a developmental psyche”.

But the facts showed that the PRIs continued to act as the mechanism to implement the central and State sponsored schemes. Then the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act, 1992 came into effect from 1993. It spelled out a bolder vision of democratic decentralization by imparting constitutional status to the PRIs functioning , enhancing the power and functions so that PRIs can act as institutions of self-governance and most importantly reserving seats for the women, members of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It ushers a new era of fiscal decentralization as the PRIs are allowed to levy and collect taxes, duties, tolls and fees as may be laid down by the State Government.

The decentralization intends to seek participation of every section of the society. The Indian women who could not come out of the facade of male supremacy and counter patriarchal values, got an opportunity through 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts to break into citadel of Political sphere of male. It is to be noted that virtually all the development agencies of the world proclaimed policies for the integration of women into economic and social processes (Hust, 2007). The provision of reservation created an opportunity for the women and other marginalized classes of India to have an access to the corridor of local power. Some states have already reserved 50 % seats for the women. But the progress is not evenly followed in different parts of the country. The significant fact is that we have 13, 41,773 elected women representatives in PRIs (Source: Press Trust of India, 2015). The share of women varies considerably as it varies widely across the States. The following table indicates the variation-

Higher Elected Women Representatives	percent	Lower Elected Women Representative	percent
Jharkhand	59.18	Daman & Diu	28.87
Rajasthan	58.29	Jammu & Kashmir	29.18
Uttarakhand	57.83	Punjab	30.13
Chhattisgarh	55.14	Gujarat	32.90
Karnataka	53.40	Goa	32.97

Source: Press Trust of India, 2015

The picture is very different when we look at the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha i.e., Lower house and Upper house of Indian Parliament and also to the State Legislatures. The last general election saw the highest representation of women in Lok Sabha and the number was just 59 out of 543 which indicates only 11% of the total member while women were close to half of the electorate. If we take Nagaland as an extreme example, we would find that not a single woman has been elected in the last 50 years (Thakur and Nagarajan, 2014).

Even then the situation is slowly and gradually changing as the decentralization is taking place which gives women and marginalized groups not only to have access to the power but also enabling them to control over it. A study conducted in Sikkim showed that 89.5% women sabhadhipatis have become fully empowered as a result of their involvement in the decision making and implementing the schemes (Bhatt, 2011). The increased presence of women is also contributing to bring qualitative change in the governance. The issues which were previously ignored by the male politicians are getting the required attention. It is also the objective of the decentralization Women are forcing the State to look at the sensitive issues like poverty, inequality and gender injustice (Sinha, 2004).

Article 243A which provides for Gram Sabha in PRIs, has become the face of direct democracy in India. Gram Sabha allows all adult citizens of that village to discuss various issues and raise their concerns. All who assemble there are considered equal and this Gram Sabha has given the *dalits* (Untouchables) to challenge the caste based discrimination or caste hierarchy that exists in the Rural India and acts as a barrier in the path of decentralization and participatory democracy.

The approach to the decentralization is not stopped at the administrative level or fiscal level but created the field of other players like Non Governmental Organizations, voluntary organizations and Community Base Organizations. The State since seventies has accommodated the civil society to address issues of social justice, improve quality of life, empowerment as these form the holistic vision of development. The decentralization process ultimately aims at reaching the people and establishment of a 'Just society'. The NGOs as an operational arm of civil society needs to play a pivotal role in the era of decentralization (Asif, 2011). The decentralization has opened up

new avenues for the NGOs in the development sector. The presence of these NGOs can be found in the field of juvenile justice, anti-trafficking, forest and environment preservation, care of the elderly, women welfare and development, care of the disabled, even they are working for the development induced displaced people. These were previously in the exclusive domain of the Government. The national policy on Voluntary sector is also trying to evolve a working relationship between government and the voluntary sector without jeopardizing its autonomy and identity (Hameed, 2011).

#### Decentralization and the existing Bottlenecks-

The road to decentralization in India is and never will be trouble free journey. Even though PRIs and Urban Local Bodies have become the most important grass root level development agency and this can be attributed to the decentralization process which has gained momentum in the India, the roadblocks are too many because the hypocritical situation that exists in our country. On one hand we are talking about decentralization and on the other side or decisions on the economic policies are heavily influenced by the International Organizations like International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

The middle class of our country who are well off in comparison to the poorest has failed to uphold the principle of justice. The ways western developmental models are followed in the urban set up often forget to take into account the interests of the ordinary people. Even the drinking water has a price in the cities. The water which is not even potable is consumed by the poor. The Middle class population which forms the majority in the academia discuss on decentralization in seminars, workshop with packaged bottles never think about the plight of the ordinary commoner who could not even afford to have safe potable water even after sixty nine years of independence. Their conscience is hypothecated to gain some concession from the government. That is why without a single protest the 'Bisleri Culture' has been accepted (Fernandes, 1994). The right to safe and adequate drinking water is still a distant dream of millions in India. This is the one of the darker side of democratic decentralization where millions are affected by the policy taken by the Government.

The caste system also possesses a threat to implement decentralization. The *dalits* are still not

welcome to share power at the grass root. They are often hoodwinked by the upper caste people as the leadership of all major parties are still captured by the higher castes. Even today, some key bureaucrats are still not willing to share power with the common people.

The interesting thing is that those who fought to gain power by replacing the rich, are not willing to share it once they get taste of it. If we consider West Bengal scenario, we would find that The West Bengal Panchayati system despite of its pioneering status has lagged behind today in terms of devolution of power, finances and functions ( Ghatak and Ghatak, 2002). This is largely because of the capture of panchayats by the middle farmers, teachers and other professional who are reluctant to share power with poorest of the poor. Gram Sabhas which were supposed to provide an open forum for discussion has been turned into the political fiefdom of ruling party. The feudal mentality that prevails in the Northern states still impose a serious bottleneck regarding decentralization.

### Conclusion-

To conclude we need to accept that without decentralization of economic and political structure, it is almost impossible to remove backwardness in our country. We have to guard ourselves from the bad impact of rampant industrialization which often does not take care of the needs of the vulnerable in the society. We all feel that necessity to build a new India but that should not be at the cost of the weaker sections of society. The process of decentralization brings the marginalized from the periphery to the centre of power. The right to information Act which is in force must be used to protect the interest of those who cannot defend their rights because of lack of means. We must not forget that India is still the house of huge number of people living below poverty line. NSSO (68th round survey data) shows that 26.93 crore people live below poverty line. They badly need tools like information, literacy, power and money to participate in the decentralization process in a meaningful way. The decentralization process in India seeks to ensure peaceful social reconstruction and transformation to meet the long neglected aspirations of the common people.

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